

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 60

Halifax, 7 December 2008

Q. 60 Can they who have never heard the gospel, and so know not Jesus Christ, nor believe in Him, be saved by their living according to the light of nature?

A. They who having never heard the gospel, know not Jesus Christ, and believe not in Him, cannot be saved, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according the light of nature, or the laws of that religion which they profess; neither is there salvation in any other, but in Christ alone, who is the Saviour only of His body the church.

Introduction:

It is a wonderful thing to be redeemed.

- Even this morning we looked at how full and complete our hope in Christ is...

And in our catechism study, we have been dealing with those questions that have to do with the benefits of redemption,

- And in particular, we began to look at who the beneficiaries of redemption are...
 - We saw that the world in general is a beneficiary...
 - The whole world would have perished but for Christ, yet now the whole world is saved—not every person, but the world as an entity...
 - And likewise we saw that the whole church is saved...
 - not that there are no dead branches to be cut off and cast into the fire at the end...
 - but that the church is the society that is saved and that Christ came to save and He does save.
- And finally, we saw that the elect are saved—the sheep...
 - every last one of them is brought to Jesus Christ to receive the benefits of His redemption.
 - Not one of them can be lost—they will all hear His voice and come to Him because He has laid down His life for them in particular—
 - and so having purchased them, they are all saved—
 - being redeemed, they have the benefits of His redemption applied to them.

And the question we take up today flows directly out of this...

- It also has to do with identifying those who receive Christ's benefits...
 - And it identifies them as those only who have heard the gospel...

- It excludes all who have not heard the gospel and identifies Christ as the Saviour only of His body the church.
- Listen to it again...

Q. 60 Can they who have never heard the gospel, and so know not Jesus Christ, nor believe in Him, be saved by their living according to the light of nature?

- This is a very common question in our day...
 - Not exactly in these words, but the idea involved...
 - Most of you have heard it...
 - Usually, it comes as an objection whenever you tell someone that Christ is the only one by whom we may be saved...
 - People will say...
 - “Well what about those who have never heard?”
 - Or they will say,
 - “What about the honest sincere person who does the best he can with what he knows, but who has never had an opportunity to hear the gospel?”
 - Well, the catechism answers that such persons cannot be saved...
 - It says:

A. They who having never heard the gospel, know not Jesus Christ, and believe not in Him, cannot be saved, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according the light of nature, or the laws of that religion which they profess; neither is there salvation in any other, but in Christ alone, who is the Saviour only of His body the church.
- Now almost as soon as you say such a thing,
 - you often hear the objection that this is not fair.
- Sometimes the objection is stated in this form...
 - “How can God hold a person responsible for something he doesn’t even know about?”
 - Now I want to make it clear that this is not what we are saying...
 - We are not saying that God holds people responsible and punishes them for *not hearing the gospel*.
 - They are punished for their *sin*, for their *idolatry*, for the way they have treated their neighbour, for being a sinner...

- But they are not punished for rejecting the gospel because they never rejected it...
- You see, the gospel is the way of rescue—the way to obtain forgiveness—
 - So if a person doesn't hear it,
 - it means that he doesn't have the *opportunity* to be rescued...
 - He is left without knowledge of how to be saved...
 - He is left to be punished as he deserves.
 - He will be judged on the basis of what he has done and on the basis of what he is as a sinner.
 - So be sure you are clear...
 - We are not saying that a person who has never heard will be judged for not hearing...
 - we are saying that there is only one way of rescue and unless he discovers that way, he cannot be saved by some other way...
- But even when this is understood,
 - the objection is still raised that this is not fair...
 - that it is not fair because it leaves those who never hear the gospel without a chance to be saved.
 - Well, if you think that is unfair, you are wrong...
 - You are wrong because God is just and His word clearly tells us that those who do not hear the gospel cannot be saved.
 - Let's go to our Scripture reading so you can see this for yourself...

Our Scripture reading is Romans 10:1-21.

- READ Romans 10:1-21

TRANS> From this text, you can see clearly in the first place that:

I. The only way to obtain righteousness is by believing the gospel of Christ.

A. Paul shows that even the Jews who had the law could only be saved by faith in Christ.

1. He is yearning for them and praying for them because they have not believed.
 - a. And because they do not believe, they are in need of salvation—
 - You see in verse 1 that Paul is praying for their salvation...
 - Just because they were religious and were the ones through whom Jesus came did not bring about their salvation.

- b. That means that they are condemned—lost—on their way to Hell because they do not have the righteousness that God provides and requires.
 - Now there were some Jews that were already trusting in Christ promised before He appeared,
 - and when He did appear and they learned of Him, they immediately rejoiced that the one that they had sought had now come...
 - Having believed in Christ promised, they believed in Christ given.

TRANS> But for the most part, this was not so—

- For the most part, the Jews in Paul's day had used the law in the wrong way...
2. In verse 3, Paul explains that they tried to establish their own righteousness.
 - a. He is referring to what he said at the end of the last chapter.
 - In Romans 9:31-32.
 - **Rom 9:31-32: but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because *they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.***
 - They tried to become righteous by observing the law.
 - b. This was so wrong!
 - 1) The whole purpose of the law was to show Israel their need for Christ...
 - their need for Christ to come and die for their sins—to make atonement for them...
 - That was what all the ceremonies in the law were about...
 - The law showed Israel that God was holy.
 - The law showed them that they must be purified by the blood of the covenant to come near to Him...
 - The law showed them that the way was not yet opened as they had to stand at a distance from the holy place where God was revealed.
 - Everything about the law pointed straight to Jesus Christ!
 - 2) But instead of recognising Him as the promised Saviour when He came...
 - Most of them clung to the law—to the ceremonies that were designed to show their need of Him—
 - as if those ceremonies could save them!
 - They rejected everything the ceremonies told them...
 - The ceremonies said,

- “you need Christ,”
- “look to Christ, look to Christ...”
- And they said,
 - “We don’t need Christ, we have the ceremonies!”
 - “We have the law to save us!”

TRANS> Of course there were some Jews, like Anna and Simeon, who were looking for Christ, and immediately believed,

- and there were those like Paul who came to believe later...

3) Those Jews who come to Christ do not look to the law for righteousness...

- As verse 4 says,
 - **“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”**
- As soon as they see what Christ did to obtain righteousness for His people,
 - they have no more use for the law that was given only to point to Him until He came...
 - After the Saviour has come and offered His sacrifice,
 - you don’t need lambs and bulls and priests and temples that only point to Him...
 - You have Him with a fully accomplished salvation...
 - You have a gospel to believe—
 - the good news of what He did to obtain salvation!

B. Everyone who does believe this gospel is saved.

1. Paul says this over and over in verse 11-13.

a. You can see how he says it three times:

- **Romans 10:11-13: “For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For ‘whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.’ ”**

b. It makes no difference whether you are a Jew who had the law or a Gentile who did not have it to start with...

- Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved...
- Now that He has come,
 - it is by believing the good news about what He has done...

- not by keeping the ceremonies that were designed to keep you looking for what He was going to do.
2. Paul summarises what it was that Jesus did to save—
- what it is that a person must believe in for salvation
 - He does this in verses 8-10...
 - **Rom 10:8-10: “But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”**
- a. You see that it describes it as “the word of faith which we preach”
- That is how he describes it in verse 8...
 - It is the message of Paul and his associates—that message that calls for you to believe or depend on Jesus...
- b. All who are saved, he says, do two things when they hear this message...
- 1) They confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord...
 - That is, they publicly own Him as their Lord and Saviour and so follow Him.
 - 2) They believe in their heart that God has raised him from the dead...
 - They believe that God has accepted His sacrifice for our sins and so raised Him from the dead to show the acceptance of all His people.

TRANS> So you see that believing the good news about Christ is the only way to be saved...

- Now if believing the message of Christ is the only way to be saved, it only makes sense that no one can be saved unless he has heard the message...

II. No one can be saved unless he hears the gospel.

A. Paul reasons this way in verses 14-15.

1. Romans 10:14-15 says:
 - **“How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?”**
- a. The answer to these questions is obvious—
- Of course they cannot be saved if they don’t know what Christ has done...
 - How can they rely on Him for salvation if they have never even heard of Him?

- b. Not hearing the gospel excludes them from salvation...

TRANS> And indeed...throughout its pages,

- 2. The Bible shows the hopeless condition of those who are outside the covenant people—away from where God’s revelation has been given:

- a. In Eph 2:11ff, Paul shows the Gentile Ephesians that they were without hope before the gospel came to them.

- He says:

- **Ephesians 2:11-12: Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.**

- To be without Christ was to be entirely without hope and without God in the world...

- There was not some alternative way of salvation.

- They had nothing until they learned of Christ...

- b. Hear what other scriptures saw about the Gentiles without the gospel...

- 1) Col 1:21 says they were “alienated by wicked works” and “enemies in their minds”

- 2) Gal 4:8 says that they did not know God before they came to Christ, and that they served those which by nature are not gods...

- 3) 1 Cor 10:20 says that when the Gentiles offer a sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God...

- Far from saying that they were worshipping the same God that we worship—only in a different way—

- He says they were worshipping demons.

TRANS> So you see that the scripture consistently teaches that those who are outside God’s covenant do not know Him by the light of nature or by practicing their own religion.

- c. The only way they can come to know God is by believing the gospel

- Faith is the only remedy...

- and, as Paul says in verse 17,

- “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.”

- For the Gentiles,
 - It was not until this message came to them that they could believe it and be saved...
 - The coming of the message was what made the difference
 - **Eph 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace...**
 - And in Eph 2:17, it says that Christ brought the gospel to them through preaching:
 - **Eph 2:17: And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,**
 - They are fully made to be God's people by believing the message preached—the message about faith in Christ.

B. In Romans 10, Paul shows the foolishness of the Jews in comparison with these believing Gentiles.

1. The Jews had the word right there with them...

- As it says in Romans 10:8:
 - **Romans 10:8: “ ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith which we preach):”**
- This is a quote from Deuteronomy 30...
 - It shows that the Word was right there all along for them to believe...
 - It was in their ceremonies...
 - What a tremendous advantage they had!
 - What a tremendous blessing!
 - What a privilege!
- But even though they had it right there, they did not believe...
 - Verse 16 says:
 - **Rom 10:16: “But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our report?’ ”**
 - And verse 21 explains how the Lord says to Israel:
 - **Rom 10:21: “All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”**

2. Paul compares this with the other nations who were just now receiving the word...
 - a. Paul shows that the message is going out into the world even as he wrote—
 - 1) So the problem for Israel—the cause of their ignorance—
 - was not that they had not heard—
 - Of course they have heard—
 - Now even the Gentiles are hearing...
 - That is what Paul is bringing out in verse 18 when he says:
 - Rom 10:18: **“But I say, have they not heard? Yes indeed: ‘Their sound has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.’”**
 - If the word has now sounded out into the world from Israel,
 - surely Israel has heard!
 - The Gospel was brought to them first!
 - 2) And in verse 19-20, Paul shows that the Gentiles, now that they are hearing the message, are believing it.
 - **Rom 10:19-20: But I say, did Israel not know? First Moses says: “I will provoke you to jealousy by *those who are* not a nation, I will move you to anger by a foolish nation.” But Isaiah is very bold and says: “I was found by those who did not seek Me; I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me.”**
 - Those who did not seek God that have now found him refers, of course, to the Gentiles.
3. How foolish for Israel to have this message and not believe when the nations who are hearing it from Israel are believing!
 - a. Paul is distressed at such hardness among his fellow Israelites.
 - They should have welcomed it with joy...
 - They should have seen the messenger’s feet who brought it as beautiful—but instead they stoned the messengers!
 - b. We see it among our people in Canada today.
 - We have had the gospel in our land for a long time...
 - We have sent it out to other nations...
 - But how many trust in the NT ceremonies that point to Christ, instead of in Christ Himself!

- How many look to Him as an example to follow so they can be righteous by works instead of by faith in His blood...
 - How many trust in some ritual like going to the front of the church and praying a prayer instead of repenting of their sins and resting on Him for forgiveness.
- c. But praise God that the gospel continues to spread to those who have not heard.
- It is breaking into new territory even as our people reject it...
 - It is going to new places so that persons can be saved who have never heard.
 - How foolish the Jews were to reject this blessed message...
 - How foolish the church in Canada is to reject it today when others are welcoming it.

TRANS> And so you see then that it is only by believing the gospel that you can be saved...

- and that before you can believe the gospel you must hear the gospel...
 - Those who have not heard the gospel cannot be saved...
 - Now I want to look at...

III. Three reasons why it is important for you to hold firmly to this doctrine.

- If you don't believe certain aspects of God's revelation, it will affect other things.
 - And that is certainly the case with this doctrine.
- First of all, it is important for you to hold this doctrine...
 - A. That you might have true gratitude for the privilege of hearing the gospel
 - 1. This doctrine is sort of a test for you...
 - a. If you think it is unjust that some people have not ever heard the gospel—
 - that for all those years before Christ came the Gentiles were left in darkness...
 - And that today there are millions of people who have never heard...
 - I say, if you think that is unjust,
 - then you don't really understand what a privilege it is that there should even be a gospel in the world at all.
 - b. You see, if God leaves someone to perish,
 - He has done them no wrong!
 - No one is condemned because they did not hear the gospel...

- they are condemned because they are sinners who deserve to be punished—that is what we all deserve...
- c. If you start a business and bring others into it and give them ownership, but then they all unite together to oust you and end up ruining themselves,
- will anyone fault you if you, in sheer mercy, should go to a couple of them and offer them a new start at your own expense?
 - Would there be any justification for anyone to say that you were unfair to the other crooks if you did not go to every last one of them with the same offer?
 - Of course not!
 - You were showing them mercy that they in no way deserved!
2. Recognise that you did not deserve to even hear—
- Really and truly, you did not deserve it!
 - It is wicked of you to look at hearing as a *right* to which everyone is entitled...
 - Now as far as we are concerned, we are to preach the gospel to every one...
 - but as far as God is concerned, He does not in His providence bring the gospel to all.
 - He is under no obligation to do so.
 - You ought to be extremely grateful that you have heard!
 - Don't make a high privilege into a right...
 - See as it is! Something for which you should be extremely grateful!

TRANS> That is the first reason for believing this doctrine that those who do not hear the gospel cannot be saved.

- Secondly, you ought to believe it...

B. That you might give God the glory that is due to Him.

1. To the Father who gave and requires this atonement.

a. For you to think that there might be another way for a sinner to be reconciled with God—some way other than Christ—

- is to grossly misunderstand the character of God.

b. He is a holy and gracious God, a just God who cannot look on sin...

- If it had been possible in keeping with His holy justice for Him to save people apart from Christ—
 - He would never have had Christ crucified!
 - With deep agony, Jesus cried out to Him for mercy in Gethsemane “if it be possible—let this cup pass from me”
 - In other words, He was saying...
 - “If there is some other way that sinners might be saved...use that way!”
 - He was going to bear the pains of Hell—the wrath and curse of the Father He loved so well from all eternity!
- Mark it well, if it had been possible, His gracious Father would have spared Him...
 - He would have found out that other way...
 - If sinners could be saved by doing the best they can with the light they have,
 - that would have been God’s way of salvation for everyone!
 - But don’t you see—
 - the problem of sin requires much more radical measures than that!
- c. To suggest that sinners can be saved in some other way is to grossly misrepresent God the Father and to dishonour Him...
 - To minimise His true justice and holiness...
 - To minimise the great sacrifice it was for Him to send His Son and the great act of love it was when we were so vile in His holy eyes that nothing else would do!

TRANS> And even as it greatly dishonours the Father, so also...

2. It greatly dishonours the Son...

- a. It dishonours Him because it greatly cheapens the work that He did, making it unnecessary...
 - not recognising how much He had to bear for our sakes!
 - not recognising that there is no substitute for what He did!
- b. Of course there are some who suppose that those who walk by the light of what they have, even though they do not know Christ,
 - are actually saved by Him and just don’t know it...

- That they will find out when they get to heaven, but that they do not know it in this life...
 - But that is not what Scripture teaches...
 - Scripture teaches that Christ gathers all for whom He died into His fold...
 - It teaches that no one even wants to be saved or understands his need for it until the gospel comes to him.
3. And this leads us to the third person who is dishonoured if it is denied that a person must hear the gospel to be saved...
- a. And that is the Holy Spirit—
 - It is His work to bring the Word to all the elect...
 - It is His work to see that the preacher gets to every one God has chosen...
 - And that every one of them believes the gospel when it comes...
 - He is the one who brings the word to them in providence, and who then opens their hearts to believe.
 - His work is indispensable...
 - b. To say that persons who have never heard can be saved is to limit the power of the Holy Spirit who always gets the word to every last one of God's elect.
 - And without whose work, no one even desires to be saved...
 - Let us give God the honour that He is due in this matter.

TRANS> So it is important to believe the teaching that those who cannot hear the gospel cannot be saved,

- first, so that you will have true gratitude if you have heard...
- and second, so that you will honour the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their great work of salvation.
- And thirdly...

C. That you might be earnest to spread the gospel to others...

- If you know that only those who hear the gospel can be saved, it will stir you up to spread the gospel!
 - If there are other ways, there is not need to trouble yourself about it.
1. You will be earnest to spread the gospel to your children
- Oh how cruel is the father who knows the gospel,

- but does not take the time to carefully communicate it to his own children—
 - to his own children who have received their sinful nature from their father.
- This is surely more cruel than the parent who neglects to give his child food and drink.
 - To leave him without the knowledge of salvation is to do all you can to fit him for Hell for his ignorance.
- Children are so dependent on their parents about this...
 - They will go where you take them and if you neglect to give them the word, they will grow up in ignorance of the only way of salvation.
 - This is why the Lord regards the children of His people as His people—
 - He assumes that their parents will train them up in the Lord and will not hide the gospel from them.
 - And He says that if you cause one of these little ones to stumble, it would be better if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were cast into the sea.
- You, parent, have the opportunity to bring the gospel to your child all through the day...
 - When they sin, you can lead them to Christ to pray for forgiveness and grace to change...
 - And each day, you can gather them around you to hear the word and you can carefully explain it to them...
 - And all along you can talk about the goodness of the Lord and how we are to love Him...

TRANS> God forbid that your own children should be cut off from the privilege of hearing the gospel because of your slothfulness!

2. You also ought to be earnest to spread the word to your friends and relations.
 - a. Some of them may have gone to churches that no longer have the gospel...
 - If churches refuse to abide in the word, Jesus will eventually remove His word from them and leave them to perish in their ignorance.
 - There are many churches like that...
 - Churches that leave their members as ignorant of the true way of salvation as if they lived in a place where the gospel had never been known.

- b. If you have friends or relatives who are in this condition, you are to take pity on them and bring the gospel to them,
 - even as Paul always went first to his own people in every city he visited—
 - He began with synagogue where there was a form of religion,
 - and endeavoured to show them the significance of Jesus as the only Saviour.
 - As a result of his labours, many believed.
 - You see how earnest he was about relieving their ignorance...
 - In verse 1 he says that his
 - **“heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved.”**
 - They are ignorant even though they are among the people who have heard but have over the years rejected.

TRANS> Is it your prayer and your heart’s desire for your brethren after the flesh that they might be saved?

- If you really begin to grasp what will become of them if they remain in their ignorance of Christ, it will surely become your prayer and desire.
- 3. You also ought to be earnest to spread the word to the nations...
 - Jesus commanded His disciples to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.
 - This was not merely a commandment for that generation, but for the church as a whole over the centuries...
 - for His call was also accompanied with a promise...
 - And I say, if you believe that those who have never heard will certainly perish because they do not have not heard the gospel to believe...
 - You will be moved to contribute to missions and to pray for missionaries as they labour to spread the word...
 - It is a task that the whole church is given to do and we all have a part in it.
 - This good news is so good that we want to carry it to them that they might be saved and join us in giving thanks to God.

Conclusion: So you see how important it is to receive this doctrine...

- It is taught in scripture and without it, you cannot be grateful, you cannot honour God for His saving work, and you cannot have a proper concern for those who have not heard.